THE BELEAGUERED CASTLE.

by H. J. VERNON.

The castle had already been beleaguered a week, and the hopes of the besieged daily waxed fainter and fainter. The friends who had stood by the gallant old Lord. Derwent when the fortunes of his house were high, had deserted him in the hour of his extremity, and left him to contend alone against the bitterest enemy of his house, an enemy whose hereditary hatred was now inflamed by the refusal of the old Baron to purchase an amnesty by sacrificing his only daughter to the arms of his foe. That daughter had been betrothed years before to a younf kinsman of Lord Derwent, who was now on a crusade to the Holy Land, and though nearly two summers had came and gone" since intelligence had been received from the good Knight, yet the Baron would have remained firm to his word, even if the suit of his foe had not been, as it was, repulsive to his child. So he had sent back a refusal to the proud De Courtenay, and when the latter threatened to harry his land and lordship unless he retracted the answer, the chivalrous old lord, although conscious of his inability to contend with De Courtenay, had replied by a bold defiance. His foe had proceeded to execute his threat, unchecked by the interposition of the royal hand, for the king himself was a prisoner in Germany, and his unworthy brother John permitted his followers, of whom De Courtenay was one, to pursue their own schemes of revenge or aggrandizement unchecked. Thus the foe of the good Baron had met hitherto no check to his rapacity. He had threatened to harry the lands of Derwent—and fearfully had he executed his threat! Manor after manor had been laid waste, village after village had been burned, and its inhabitants slaughtered or made prisoners, and now the bold father, fighting to the last with desperate bravery, had been driven into his last stronghold, which he was vainly attempting to defend, with an armfull of men, against almost countless numbers.

The siege had already continued a week, and all hope of succor from

the old allies of his house, had long since been given over by the Baron. The provisions of the garrison had been exhausted, and the few Knights left in Derwent's train, were now met in the great hail to consult with their leader, respecting the course to be pursued.

It was a sad and melancholy group. There were the war-worn and discomfited Knights, their countenances betokening the extremity to which they were reduced —there was the grey haired Baron, unable wholly to conceal his fears, and yet unwilling to discourage his followers by betraying any symptoms of anxiety—and there too was the daughter, the innocent cause of the peril in which all were placed, tenderly gazing up into her father's face, and by that silent display of emotion filling every heart of the group with a renewed determination to perish or preserve her.

"I would, Amy," said the Baron, putting back the fair hair from his child's eyes, and gazing into her face with all a father's affection, "that you had staid in your bower with your maidens, and not come here to listen to the extremity to which we are reduced. Even now it is not too late for you to retire—the desperate discussions of brave men in peril are scarce fit for maiden's ears."

"Not so—not so, father," interrupted the daughter, "a noble maiden should ever be the first to hear counsel in a moment like this, especially when it is for her that the peril is to be encountered. But this is not all. I have heard the proposal of Do Courtenay to withdraw his forces even now, if I am given up. Therefore have I left my bower and joined you in the hall. And now hear me," she said, speaking clearly and slowly, as one who has come to some fixed determination speaks, "I have too long remained silent, aye! until I have suffered these brave men to be brought into this extremity, and now it becomes me to speak. It is apparent that no earthly power can prevent this castle from falling into the enemy's hands—then why protract a useless resistance? I know what you will all say," she continued, seeing that several were about to speak—"that I will thus fall into the hands of De Courtenay. Well—be it so. Can further

resistance prevent this? Then why bring ruin needlessly on all? If, by protracting the defence, we could ensure succor, then might I listen to you; but no such hope of relief exists. A prey to the spoiler I must be, then let me be the sacrifice, but let these innocent men escape."

For a moment her hearers were speechless at the generosity of her proposal. Then every voice was lifted up against it

"No," exclaimed a veteran Knight, "never will we desert you—we would be recreant Knights if we should. By our hopes of salvation we will, one and all, die in your defence."

This gallant speech was welcomed with shouts by the other Knights until the old hall rung with their enthusiasm.

"I knew, noble Knights," said the Baron, when the tumult had partially subsided, and his voice betrayed no little emotion as he spoke, "I knew what your answer would be to the insulting proposal of De Courtenay. But I was resolved that you should hear and decide for yourselves. I little thought that my child would be here to make the proposal for herself, but I thank you again and again for your enthusiasm in her favor. I am an old man and my days are numbered; and all I regret is that I may not be able ere I die to reward you for this day's devotion. But since we are all determined, let us give an answer to the foe, and then resume our place on the walls. De Courtenay will now storm the place at all points, and we must depend on God and our good right arms. As for you, Amy, hie to your chamber and there offer up prayers for us."

The Baron strove in speaking to assume the semblance of one in whom some hope, still lingered, but it was evident that he did not deceive either his child or his followers. All knew that the castle could not hold out against another attack. But the Knights were resolved, like brave men, to die at their posts, while Amy, although she made a second attempt to be heard, saw that her defenders would not listen to her proposal. In silence, therefore, they left the great hall; but as the

father parted from his daughter, he pressed a last kiss on her now trembling lips—those lips which he never expected again to caress in this world.

The refusal of the besieged to accede to the terms offered to them was hailed by a low growl of rage on the part of the assailants, and instantly the foe commenced, from all quarters, an attack on the castle. Thrice already had they assailed it, but this time they rushed forward with a fury fourfold greater than on either former occasion. In vain the beleaguered men-at-arms met them at every turn—in vain missiles of every sort were hurled down on the heads of the assailants, the forces of De Courtenay soon gained a footing on the outer wall, and the brave defenders were driven to the Keep as their last resort. Here the Baron collected his melancholy band, and made ready for a desperate defence of his last stronghold. Already his little band was terribly thinned, but its stem resolution was unabated. He glanced around it anxiously as the trumpets sounded to the charge, and his heart died within him when he surveyed its scanty number, but at this instant, happening to cast his eyes on the opposite horizon, he fancied he saw something glittering far off in the sun, like a row of spears.

“Michael,” he said, eagerly, to a stout soldier beside him, “look off by yonder wood, just on the brow of the hill, what see you!”

“They seem like spears glancing in the sun—pray God they may be friends.”

“Amen!” said the Baron, and the onset again began.

Fierce and furious was the fight. The assailants were hot for the blood of their stubborn opponents—the defenders of the castle fought with the fury of desperate men. The Keep seemed impregnable. Onset after onset was made on it by the foe, and each onset was repulsed by the desperate defenders.

Meanwhile the Baron had communicated his discovery to no one except to the soldier, and on him he had enjoined silence; for he was unwilling to raise the hopes of his followers without cause. In the intervals of the fight he turned his eyes toward the approaching cavalcade, and it was with unbounded joy that he at length fancied he perceived a well known banner. He was not mistaken. Almost at the same instant a message arrived from his child, who kept watch at the highest loop hole of the Keep, that the approaching cavalcade bore more than one friendly pennon. The news was now communicated to the defenders indiscriminately, and though the conflict did not slacken, each man fought with renewed vigor. The coming succor had now become discernible from the enemy's camp, and the foe wavered in his assault, and prepared to resist this new enemy. But after a moment's hesitation the attack was renewed with even greater vigor. At this moment too the approaching cavalcade became hid by an intervening elevation.

"They must know our extremity and will spare no time in coming up," said the Baron, exhorting his followers to withstand this new assault, "and lo! there they come, dashing over the hill—the Lord be praised : they are really friends, and there is my kinsman's banner from Palestine in the van."

It was even so. The young Knight had returned opportunely to his country, and hearing of his uncle's strait had hurried by forced marches to succor him. He saw at once that he had come at a critical moment, and dashing down the hill, ho charged with his squadron into the very heart of the assailants. The combat was short but fierce. The forces of the young Knight were large, and they were burning to avenge a wrong done to the kinsman of their leader; while the assailants were weakened by their losses, and dispirited by the succor thus afforded to their foes. The forces of De Courtenay soon broke and fled, while he himself fell before the hand of the young Knight. The confusion was completed by a rally made by the besieged.

Our pen cannot do justice to the meeting of the long separated lovers. We will drop a veil over it, simply saying that Amy never forgot this last day of the Beleaguered Castle.

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